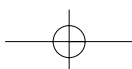
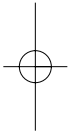


Part 1

INTRODUCTION TO NURTURE GROUPS



1

Overview

This chapter describes:

- what a nurture group is
- how nurture groups help children and young people to succeed in school
- the criteria for a classic nurture group and some variants.



Nurture groups are an inclusive (Howes et al., 2002), educational, in-school resource for mainly primary school children, although increasingly aspects of the nurture approach are being used with some success in both the early years and secondary phases (Bennathan and Rose, 2008). They are for children whose emotional, social, behavioural and cognitive learning needs cannot be met in the mainstream class and who will be or should be at School Action Plus on the SEN register. Their difficulties are markedly varied, often severe, are a cause of underachievement and sometimes lead to exclusion from school. They are rarely considered appropriate for psychotherapy and are usually referred on to a resource within education such as a Pupil Referral Unit (PRU). Typically, such children have grown up in circumstances of stress and adversity sufficiently severe to limit or disturb the nurturing process of the earliest years. To varying extents, they are without the basic and essential learning that normally from birth is bound into a close and trusting relationship with an attentive and responsive parent.

School expectations

Teachers expect new entrants to school to be making progress towards meeting the Early Learning Goals (QCA, 1999) and, in their personal, social and emotional development, to:

- feel secure, trust known adults to be kind and helpful, and concerned about their well-being
- be responsive to them, biddable and cooperative
- approach and respond to other children and speak in a familiar group
- have some understanding of immediate cause and effect
- be eager to extend their past experience, and tolerate the frustration and disappointment of not succeeding
- find the school day stimulating but not overwhelming
- be confident to try new activities and initiate ideas.

This has never been the case for all children. Disquiet, which became more evident in the 1960s, continues into the 21st century. As the gap widens and is perceived more generally to be a barrier to learning, there is recognition at government level of the need to intervene. The Steer report on behaviour in schools, *Learning Behaviour: Lessons Learned* (DCSF, 2009a), considers nurture groups to be an important resource for improving children's behaviour. They have a clear rationale underpinned by sound theory but are easily accessible to practitioners and are cost-effective.

Evaluations from some LAs and individual schools demonstrate that nurture groups are proving to be more economically sustainable than other support provided for vulnerable children. One LA, LB Enfield, has identified the following costings (2009) for children in various support programmes (all figures are approximate):

Complex needs placement in an Enfield school for an Enfield child (middle band C)	£13,000+ per annum
Out-of-borough day school for one child (band E)	£17,000+ per annum

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EBD out-of-borough residential placement for one child (independent school)	£40,000+ per annum
Full-time LSA support per child	£14,000+ per annum
Nurture group provision (for a minimum of 10 children)	£55,000 per annum
Nurture group provision (for one child)	£5,500 per annum

An established, classic nurture group may have up to 30 children passing through each year, i.e. a regular primary class group size which brings the cost down to **£1,833** per child.

The aim of the nurture group is to create the world of earliest childhood in school, and through this build in the basic and essential learning experiences normally gained in the first three years of life, thus enabling the children to participate fully in the mainstream class, typically within a year. The process is modelled on normal development from birth and the content is the essential precursor of the statutory National Curriculum including the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) (DCSF, 2008a).

Children's difficulties: their nature and origin

Children's difficulties in school are often severe, and sometimes seem bizarre. They range from autistic-like behaviour at one extreme, to disruptive behaviour at the other that may involve physical violence and sometimes exclusion from school. Although not always immediately apparent, many of the children have not reached the developmental level of the normal three-year-old, and are in difficulties from the time they enter school. They undermine the teachers' skills and cause enormous stress and despair, and sometimes negativism. They are not usually felt to be suitable for psychotherapy because to varying extents all aspects of their development have been impaired: their experience is limited, poorly organized and has little coherence, their concepts are imperfect and their feelings confused. They are without a sufficiently organized and

coherent past experience from which to develop and there is no clear focus for intervention.

The parents, too, are often difficult to engage. Many of them live under extreme and disabling personal stress. If referred to a mental health resource because of their children's difficulties in school, they have the burden of finding their way to an unfamiliar place to face a bewildering discussion and the visit can be counterproductive. Many first appointments are not kept, and if kept are rarely sustained. The aims of Sure Start and the move to children's centres are welcome but have yet to reach the most disadvantaged. For too many families, it all seems of little relevance, particularly when their situation seems beyond repair; feelings are too chaotic to disentangle, or are submerged under anger or depression.

The children's difficulties seem related to the stage in the earliest years when nurturing care was critically impaired. Over the years, changing historical forces have led to a different distribution of the more clearly defined difficulties; those that are more generalized have increased markedly and over a wider social spectrum.

Children referred to nurture groups fall broadly into two groups, and Chapter 10 has detailed descriptions.

Nurture children

These are reception-age children who are functionally below the age of three, or, if older, at least two to three years below their chronological age; they all have considerable social, emotional, behavioural and learning difficulties. These were relatively clearly defined in the 1960s in the area where nurture groups were originally developed, and it is from this experience that the thinking and practice of the nurture groups derive.

Children who need nurturing

These children are also successfully placed in nurture groups but are not *nurture children*. They are emotionally disorganized, but are not without the basic learning of the earliest years. Other forms of provision for children with SEBD may meet some of their needs although they often continue to underachieve. Teachers may respond intuitively to their underlying need for attachment and

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provide domestic experiences and family-type relationships but these are not necessarily part of the planned intervention.

Multiple and varied difficulties but shared needs

The difficulties of almost all children in nurture groups are multiple, and a disproportionate number, compared with the general school population, have complicating features such as motor coordination and speech and language difficulties, impaired hearing or sight, or ill health.

Importantly, the teacher works with an assistant within this complexity, without needing to understand how these complex and varied difficulties came about. They rarely need to know the nature of the past stress on the children, and attempting to understand the dynamics of the particular family and the children's perception of themselves and their world is neither feasible nor relevant. The children share a history of early developmental impairment and loss; their common need is for restorative learning experiences at an earlier developmental level.

The basis of nurture work: the teacher's primary task

Nurture work is based on the observation that everyone developmentally ahead of young children seems biologically programmed into relating to them in a developmentally appropriate way. This is the intuitive response that the practitioners bring to their work.

Both adults work together in partnership, using their particular expertise to relate intuitively and appropriately to the children's attachment needs, drawing on an understanding of child development, using observational and assessment skills and having detailed curriculum subject knowledge from the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) through to the age-appropriate National Curriculum levels.

The model

The model is the attentive, interactive process of parents and children in the earliest years within a structure commensurate with the physical and physiological development of babies and toddlers. It

focuses and expands on the relational features from recognized child development phases such as those provided in the EYFS materials (DCSF, 2008a). The nurture group model is shown below.

Earliest learning: a summary chart

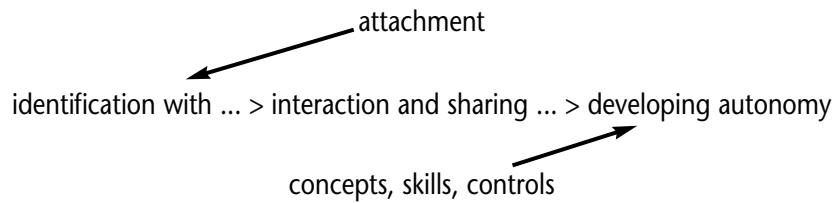


Figure 1. Early Nurture

Table 1. The Context of Early Childhood Experiences

Babies/young children in the home	Re-created structures in the nurture group
Babies are emotionally and physically attached from the beginning, are physically dependent and need protection	Close physical proximity in the home area in a domestic setting facilitates emotional and physical attachment.
Experiences are determined by their developmental level (mobility, vision, interest, attention), and parents' intuitive response to their needs.	T/A (teacher and/or assistant) select basic experiences, and control them. They emphasize developmentally relevant features and direct the children's attention to these.
The waking day is short, slow-moving, broken up by rest and routines. There is a clear time structure. Physical needs determine the rhythm of the day.	The day is broken up by slow-moving interludes and routines. Everything is taken slowly, and there is a clear time structure.
Parents provide simple, restricted, repetitive routines and consistent management from the beginning and manageable learning experiences through appropriate play materials and developmentally relevant interaction.	T/A establish routines, emphasize order and routine; ensure much repetition; achieve/convey behavioural expectations by clear prohibitions and limits. Toys and activities are developmentally relevant, and the adults' language and interaction are appropriate for this level.

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The situation is made appropriate for an earlier developmental level; it is simpler, more immediate, more routinized, more protected. Restrictions and constraints provide clarity of experience and focus the children's attention; they engage at this level, attention is held and there is much repetition. Basic experiences and attachment to the adults are consolidated. Children experience satisfaction and approval, and attachment to the adults is strengthened. Routine gives security and they anticipate with confidence and pleasure.

Growth-promoting patterns are established.

Table 2. The Content of Early Childhood Experiences

This stage relates to the developmental phase from birth to approximately 11 months.

Attachment and proximity: earliest learning	
Babies/young children in the home	Re-created structures in the nurture group
Food, comfort, holding close; consistent care and support.	Food, comfort, close physical contact; consistent care and support.
Cradling, rocking; sensory exploration; touch in communication.	Cradling, rocking; sensory exploration; touch in communication.
Intense concentration on parents' eyes and face. They communicate mood/feelings through face/voice, spontaneously exaggerating their response.	T/A draw children's attention to their eyes and faces, and make and establish eye contact. They deliberately exaggerate their facial expression and tone of voice.
Closeness; intimate interplay; shared feelings/satisfaction. Parents' verbal accompaniment reflects pleasure, and child's loveableness and value. Parents give frequent positive acknowledgement of their child.	There is closeness, intimate interplay and shared feelings/satisfaction. T/A's verbal accompaniment reflects pleasure, and child's loveableness and value. They make frequent positive acknowledgement of each child.
Parents have age-appropriate expectations; accept asocial behaviour but control events and provide manageable constraints and alternatives.	T/A have developmentally appropriate expectations. They tolerate asocial behaviour but give purposeful direction, control events and provide manageable constraints and alternatives.

The foundations of trust, security, positive mood and identity are built in through continuing support and shared basic satisfactions in the context of

adult-child emotional attachment and physical proximity. Feelings are communicated and shared, and there is close identification and empathy, the one with the other, and an empathetic response to subtle non-verbal signals. Shared experience, registered in language, leads to an understanding of basic attributes and properties of materials, and of objects and their relationships, and cause and effect.

This stage relates to the developmental phases from approximately 8 to 20 months.

The children have already internalized the security that comes from attachment to reliable, attentive, comforting parents and this security is reinforced through the continuing repetition of the simple routines of daily life. These become a familiar and meaningful sequence of events, and through them children gain a sense that the world is stable, orderly and predictable. In the course of physical maturation in an appropriate environment, basic competencies are acquired. Adequately consistent management of behaviour is experienced, achieved and conveyed by explicit setting of boundaries.

From this secure base, parents help children to personal autonomy through a complex process of letting go and bringing back. They are 'let go' into experiences that the parents control and ensure are manageable, and where support is provided when needed, and they are 'brought back' to the security of close contact with the parents when the situation is overwhelming and they can no longer cope. Because the parents are sensitively involved and intervene when necessary, new experiences are manageable and children are able to assimilate and consolidate them.

Table 3. Letting go and bringing back: developing autonomy

This stage relates to the developmental phases from approximately 16 to 36 months.

Babies/young children in the home	Re-created structures in the nurture group
Children do things with parents, or with parent nearby. There is frequent contact and reassurance and expression of pleasure and approval.	Children do things with T/A, or alongside; are collected together frequently with calmness and reassurance and eye contact is re-established.
Children show spontaneously arising need for transitional objects	T/A make transitional objects available to provide comfort,

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providing comfort, support, control.	support, control, and may introduce them.
Parents give attention to simple experiment and repetitive play and of own accord children persist at this level. There is much experiment and repetition.	T/A introduce, demonstrate and share early play, with experiment and repetition. Support and encouragement help them to persist at their developmental level.
Children engage in simple investigation and exploration, and because this is limited by their physical development and parents' intervention, frustration is tolerable.	T/A select basic experiences for investigation and exploration. They control and direct these, anticipate and avoid unmanageable situations and divert attention. Unnecessary frustration is reduced.
Parents give help with basic skills, procedures, and provide information, suggestions, ideas.	T/A give help with basic skills and procedures and provide information, suggestions, ideas.
Parents help/intervene when necessary and often play with children for mutual enjoyment. They share experiences and learn together. Parents respond with pleasure to each new achievement.	T/A help/intervene when necessary and often play with children for mutual enjoyment. They share experiences and learn together. T/A give immediate praise for each small gain.
Relationships are individual. Parents intuitively identify child/object/task by name, and provide a developmentally relevant running commentary.	Requests/instructions to the children are at first individual, never general; child/object/task are specifically named, and there is continuing verbalization.
Children's development is gradual, and simple experiences, in the course of physical maturation, come before complex ones. Parents prepare children for new experiences and anticipate and describe events and feelings in simple language.	Everything is in incremental stages, simple before complex, with the situation structured; essentials highlighted; and complex instructions broken down. There is detailed preparation for each new experience; feelings are anticipated and described.
Sharing and choosing come in manageable stages. There is enough play space. Parents support/control cooperative play with other children; anticipate problems, avert, intervene; identify with and share children's feelings.	The need to share is deliberately limited at first (there is enough for everyone). Grabbing is controlled. Sharing/choosing are built into manageable stages and play space is respected. Cooperative work/play is not expected, but is encouraged,

<p>Children need/demand order. Parents meet own and children's need for order by providing routine and orderliness. They involve children in orderly routines such as tidying up, sorting out and putting away.</p>	<p>introduced, controlled. T/A anticipate problems, avert, intervene; identify with and share children's feelings.</p> <p>Routines structure the day. Sorting out, tidying up and putting away are stressed. T/A show them what to do.</p>
<p>Parents provide simple, consistent basic training. They make expectations clear and demonstrate. Approval/disapproval is immediate and evident. They give help and reminders when necessary. Verbal commentary and reinforcement at this early level are simple and basic and reflect the achievement.</p>	<p>Simple, consistent, unremitting basic training is provided. T/A make their expectations clear and constantly stress them, with demonstration when appropriate. They give immediate and evident approval/disapproval and help and reminders when necessary. Their verbal commentary and reinforcement reflect children's level and achievement.</p>

The situation is made manageable and support is there when needed; new experiences are assimilated and consolidated, and the children explore with purpose and confidence. They become personally better organized and realize that they have some control over their environment. They learn to give and take and control their own behaviour, and make constructive relationships that provide satisfaction and extend their horizons. They can now manage on their own for limited periods in a familiar situation and will soon be able to function without direct help in a bigger group.

The foundations of the child's independence are becoming established.

Growth, not pathology: the central tenet

Nurture groups are about children's learning; they are not therapy. The focus of intervention for psychotherapists is the children's difficulties, and their concern is to unravel knots in a tangled fabric of early experience. The thrust of the work of the nurture practitioners is different: it is the process and content of normal early emotional,

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social and cognitive development, and the relationships, experiences and physical environment that support and facilitate this. They are concerned with weaving in and strengthening the strands of early nurture. Their perspective is forward-looking from birth, not looking back from the present. The process is one of normal learning, it is education, but at an earlier-than-usual level and the challenge is to build in the emotional, social and cognitive developmental experiences inherent in early nurture. As practitioners become confident in the approach, the mood in the school changes from despair to optimism and hope as school staff no longer feel de-skilled but become empowered.

Attachment

The process in the nurture group, as in families, is based in and through attachment (Bowlby, 1969), and is mediated within and through a secure relationship (Ainsworth, 1978). It is a complex process, but under benign circumstances, it happens during the course of normal parenting, intuitively, without much conscious thought. To restore this process in the nurture group, it is crucial that the children become attached. Their needs then become apparent, the adults respond accordingly, and the learning process follows. Some children do not attach and respond; these need more than the nurture group can provide. Becoming attached, and all that follows from this, depends on re-creating the structure as well as the content of the earliest years.

A model of normal development and parenting

The nurture practitioners provide a normal learning experience of the earliest years by responding intuitively to the children, as parents do. (See Earliest learning: a summary chart). They build up incrementally their experience of themselves and the world, and positive relationships with others. The process is structured overall by an explicit awareness of the nature and content of development, the context that is essential to it, and its direct relevance to the work of the mainstream class. It is a total learning experience, and is the earliest stage of the normal developmental/educational continuum. Practice, intuitively and in conceptual

analysis, is based on normal development in the first three years, structured in discussion and developed as a nurture curriculum leading into the appropriate level for the child of the EYFS and National Curriculum.

The classic nurture group and some variants

A classic nurture group is a class, typically of 10 to 12 children, staffed by a teacher and teaching assistant. It is in the child's neighbourhood primary school and is an integral part of the school. The classroom is furnished to be both home and school, is comfortable and welcoming, containing and protected. It is big enough for a wide range of domestic and personal activities including 'breakfast' early in the day and needed experiences at the 0–3 developmental level, as well as activities that lead into and overlap with the EYFS/ KS1 curriculum and opportunity for the appropriate age-related level of the National Curriculum. Children will be on the register of their mainstream class group and will be included in any class activities that they can manage successfully. From the beginning, they join their class for registration, assembly, break and lunchtimes and spend half a day a week in the classroom. The class teacher remains the responsible teacher for overseeing the child's learning and progress, with curriculum planning and assessment being a shared, collaborative responsibility. There is a continuous flow of communication between the child's class teacher and the nurture staff.

'Nurture'

The word has a specific, meaningful and purposeful connotation; it describes the children's needs, the nature of the help provided and the learning experiences involved. The class is therefore referred to as the nurture group but is known in school according to the system in use, for example 'rainbow class'.

Some variants

Nurture group practitioners quickly saw possibilities for adapting and applying the underlying principles of the original model more

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widely. Some schools modified classroom practice and whole-school policies to create a more nurturing ethos generally throughout the school, recognizing that when the needs of the most vulnerable children are met, then all children benefit and standards overall will rise.

With the resurgence in interest in nurture groups, we are seeing even more innovative applications of the principles both in the UK and internationally. These may be flexible variations on the part-time group, groups for older children in Key Stages 2 and 3, the application to other settings such as PRUs (or short-term schools) and special EBD schools or as a shared resource between a group of schools.

Nurture Groups in Quebec

'Kangaroo' classes started during 2005–6 in Quebec, Canada. Some also take children with severe behavioural difficulties and/or mental health problems, for whom there is no appropriate provision. They are based in a regular elementary school, have about seven students with a teacher and a teaching assistant and practice is based on nurture group principles (Bennathan and Boxall, 2000). They have a more therapeutic and less preventive approach than the UK model and students come from different schools within a school board district. Some are geographically distant from their neighbourhood school and do not have contact with their original class, although special efforts are made to allow them to spend time in regular classes. The essential features are maintained: physical organization, the understanding of the children's difficulties and how they are managed, the routines and structure. The initiative has had a great impact on the life of the children and their families. Many children who previously needed home tuition have now attended regular school happily for the whole year. The model has proved so effective in Quebec that many other school boards have set up groups, with some developing the model in secondary schools for 'grown-up kangaroos'.

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Whether or not such groups may rightly be termed nurture groups depends on how closely they adhere to the underlying principles. Cooper and Whitebread (2007) identify four variants but not all are authentic nurture groups. The curriculum is the essential identifying feature; children are not withdrawn from the curriculum but it is modified to enable them to engage in it at their appropriate developmental level.

The nurture group principles

- Children's learning is understood developmentally.
 - It is understood that all behaviour is communication.
 - The classroom offers a safe space.
 - Nurture is important for the development of self-esteem.
 - Language is a vital means of communication.
 - The importance of transitions in children's lives is understood.
- (Lucas et al., 2006)

These principles are an objective indicator to help schools determine the required elements of nurture group provision and to support curriculum planning. They are used prudently within the essential intuitive, relational and holistic nature of the provision for children at an early developmental level as described below and in which they are implicit.

Re-creating the process of earliest learning

The notion that they should respond intuitively to children is usually attractive to the nurture practitioners, and the term 'nurture' is likely to suggest a close, supportive and caring relationship. Additionally, at this early stage in the home, experiences for babies and toddlers are determined and limited by their perceptual and motor development and physiological rhythm. In recreating this learning process in school, the adults must ensure that the children's day is equivalent to that of the first three years at home as described in Part 2. The nurture group thus provides a restorative experience of early nurture as the first stage of the learning/educational process.

The working model

The adults provide a complex learning experience of intermeshing emotional, social and cognitive developmental strands by being fully available to the children, as parents are. They respond intuitively to any behaviour that would be normal in very young children. To make their task manageable, a general principle was adopted and this continues to be the guideline: 'We will be and do for them as we would for our own, at whatever developmental level they appear to be.' This leads directly to concerned identification with the children and an unconditional commitment to their well-being. It gives confidence and provides a working model that generates management strategies and learning experiences that are purposeful and of crucial developmental importance.

The school and parents

School is local, accessible and familiar. The staff make friendly supportive relationships with the parents, who sometimes ask for practical advice, and when distressed are given time and attention. They feel valued for themselves, not just because they are the parents of the children. This is a positive factor in their children's progress in school and their well-being at home.

The nurture group is fully integrated within a supportive school

The purpose of the group is to enable the children to be fully part of their peer group within a year or, at most, four terms. The group functions as an integral part of the school, as in addition to achieving and relating productively to each other, the children need help to extend their growing competence. They see and begin to make viable relationships in wider contexts and move outwards with confidence because they feel themselves to be at the protected centre of widening networks of support.

The adults' responsibilities therefore extend to creating an integrated experience for the children that includes the world of school beyond the group. Procedures within the school are modified and thus offer a nurturing environment that includes the

entire school community and even beyond, providing the child with a positive, reinforcing and sustained experience and contributing to community cohesion (DCSF, 2007a). The interacting and cumulatively developing process that is the substance of nurture work thus mirrors the normal human situation at social as well as personal levels.

Size of group

The developmental needs of some of the children are not apparent in an individual relationship, and although individual work consolidates and reinforces an attachment, opportunities do not arise naturally to help them to separate and function autonomously within the peer group. Nearly all the children need to learn to give and take with others and to be self-directing, and so it is essential that they are in groups where they are required to respect the needs and attitudes of others. In the early groups, 12 children was found to be a viable number to offer a broad enough range of opportunities for making relationships (see Chapter 9).

The teacher and assistant partnership

Two people are needed to run the group; a classic group requires a teacher and a teaching assistant, partly for the mutual support and personal development this provides but also because the children need to see constructive interaction between adults. The adults work closely together in a mutually supportive, interdependent partnership, there is considerable overlap of roles and each may take the lead at different times. The teacher takes primary responsibility for curriculum planning, assessment and recording of progress and liaison with others within the school and beyond, but both play a crucial role in creating the safe and secure environment in which children flourish and their learning is enhanced (Frederickson and Cline, 2002).

Using the model of normal learning in the earliest years with its intuitive sense of the child's early developmental needs and the parent-baby/toddler interactive process, the adults ensure that experiences and events are relevant and are simple, unhurried and carefully planned and controlled. At Key Stage (KS) 3, the roles

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resemble those of mentors (Cooper, 2001) or learning coaches (Claxton, 2002).

The structure and content of the day

The nurture day is structured to be appropriate for the level of personal organization and control of a young child: the pace is slower, the structure tighter and the constraints more immediate and evident than in the mainstream class, all essential for unhurried early developmental learning. It also reinforces trust and security, underpins the purposeful direction of behaviour and events, and provides a context for the National Curriculum. Within this structure, the children can be let go into baby/toddler-level activities or drawn back into an early attachment relationship.

The context is supportive, and through their relationship with the adults, they gain:

- trust and security
- awareness of their own feelings and those of others
- visual and kinaesthetic awareness of themselves, leading to a more integrated and differentiated body image
- increasing awareness of their own bodies in space
- awareness of the sensory qualities of the things about them, and their relationships
- appropriate and purposeful attention to their immediate real world
- communication and language skills.

These experiences are the essential underpinnings of all later development, that is:

- the capacity for empathy
- control and management of their own bodies
- attention-giving and achievement
- a more coherent understanding of the properties of the physical world and of sequence and process
- constructive social relationships and conversation.

All this leads to more effective use of their formal learning opportunities, increasing self-worth and a sense of mastery and control of events.

The learning process for the adults

The process has considerable learning potential for the adults, for they live through the experience with the children and at the same time are explicitly aware of the developmental content and its relevance to the requirements of the mainstream class. They are therefore intellectually and emotionally involved and gain theoretical insights as well as considerable personal awareness and enrichment. Their commitment and resourcefulness are at a high level and they have little need to turn to others for support.

The adults initiate and foster this growth process by 'feeling into' the earliest years and identifying with the feelings and needs of the children. It is a human response, and the most valuable source of help for the adults is within themselves.

They draw on their own intuitive resources and each learns from the other. In discussion with other nurture group practitioners, they deepen their perception of themselves in relation to the children, and gain increasing understanding of the emotional and cognitive content of their work. They are reassured of the validity of their intuitive response (Furlong, 2000) and begin to discipline this within a simple and clearly formulated developmental framework that leads, in concept and in practice, to the expectations and aims of the mainstream class. This approach dissipates the anxiety and impotence generated by the children's difficulties, provides a helpful guideline, and frees the adults to draw fully on their own personal resources, uninhibited by the feeling that somewhere there are 'experts' who know better.

The teacher's role: managing experiences

This process depends on a close relationship with the children and an intuitive 'feel' of their needs, but there are reservations:

- The process for children in the years before school is carried forward by an innate impetus for growth, but in the nurture group, it is the teacher's responsibility to know where the process is leading and to provide direction.
- The experiences of children aged 0–3 are determined and constrained by their developing physical competence and come to in an ordered and incremental way with all aspects intermesh-

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ing. For older children in the nurture group, the teacher has to provide the constraints, plan comparable experiences, focus the children's attention on them, and provide and support the necessary repetition. This presupposes that the teacher has sufficient faith in the rationale of the approach to be committed to the tight structuring that is needed.

- The teacher therefore needs, more than the interested parent, an explicit awareness of the nature of the developmental process, the circumstances that are essential to it, and its direct relevance to the work of the mainstream class.

The nurture group leads to a nurturing school

The work of the nurture group always involves the class teachers concerned, and in a committed school or group of schools, all staff are nurturing in attitude, have some understanding of the needs of the children in the group and actively support their development. In schools where there are considerable numbers of vulnerable children, the principles underpinning nurture work are incorporated into school policies and become part of general classroom practice. This requires the nurture group to be well established, the underlying principles to be accepted and their relevance to normal academic achievement to be understood. The first step, therefore, towards a cumulatively reinforcing nurturing process in the school generally is to have a classic nurture group, running well. But an essential determinant of eventual integration of the children within the mainstream class is the initial and continuing involvement of the class teachers in understanding and supporting the work of the group. As with the development of the children, this is a circular, reinforcing and ultimately spiralling process. It is a whole-school responsibility; it takes patience and time for the many strands in this intermeshing and reinforcing process to come together and for the work to be seen as successful.

Reversing the downwards spiral of deprivation

Making explicit the implicit learning content of earliest childhood led us into an area that was little explored at the time (in the 1970s). Nurture groups and the growth and health of the children

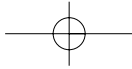
within them owe everything to the goodwill, generosity and selfless work of all concerned. Each has generated energy and enthusiasm for the others. Each has relied on a personal capacity to cope, but the knowledge that others were in the same position provided support; the shared problem-solving contributed to the foundations on which everyone has built. The work itself is energizing. It is implicitly an affirmation of a commitment to life and brings increasing self-awareness and the energizing sense of shared growth. All these things are found in good measure in the nurture groups, and we have good reason to believe that the children and their families have gained as much from us as we have from them.

Around the time of the first nurture groups, Sir Keith Joseph, then Secretary of State for Education, coined the phrase 'The cycle of deprivation'. Now, 40 years on, the lives of many families continue to be blighted by stress (Layard and Dunn, 2009). Despite government policies, deprivation is still a downwards and inwardly spiralling process of despair and depression; nurture is an upwards and outwardly spiralling process of hope and growth. We believe that the investment of our capital of good nurture for the future is of the utmost importance.

It would be logical to make this provision available at the earliest stage to all children and young people at risk of personal and school failure, and the disastrous future that so often lies ahead.

Summary

- Nurture groups are a proven intervention for emotionally vulnerable children and young people; they contribute to raising standards and are cost-effective.
- Children's needs are complex and varied but the approach is a positive one, drawing on the intuitive response of the adults to relate to the child at a developmentally appropriate level.
- Nurture groups are about children's learning; although primarily an early intervention strategy, the principles are valid for children and young people of different ages and in different settings.
- Nurture groups are at the centre of a network of relationships in the school and beyond and contribute to the well-being of society and to community cohesion.



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Further reading

Claxton, G. (2002) *Building Learning Power: Helping Young People Become Better Learners*. Bristol: TLO. Nurture practitioners/learning coaches or mentors, working with young people in KS3/4, will find Guy Claxton's 4 Rs – resilience, resourcefulness, reflection and relationships – a helpful vocabulary for communicating nurture principles.

Geddes, H. (2006) *Attachment in the Classroom*. London: Worth Publishing. This is an accessible book on attachment theory for use with school governors, senior leaders and staff generally.

Layard, R. and Dunn, J. (2009) *A Good Childhood: Searching for Values in a Competitive Age*. London: Children's Society. This book describes the obstacles that children face in today's society and which impact on their well-being and learning.

